

Keynote Summary

Always Alert to God's Signs: Exploring the Vision of *Evangelii Gaudium*

Fr. Jim Kroeger combined his written text, handout, expertise, humor and personal experiences to share his knowledge and understanding of *Evangelii Gaudium* in the context of missionary work. He noted that USCMA is all about the subtitle: “The Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World.” How do we read the signs of today? Our mission will change and grow in terms of how we read the signs, and then how we respond in the light of the gospel.

He said that he hoped show how the “signs of the times” methodology will serve all of us in our work and help us explore the mission of USCMA. After reviewing the history of Vatican II and the participation of Pope Francis in the canonizations of John XXII, Paul VI, John Paul II and the recent beatification of John Paul I, Fr. Jim observed that in a sense, Francis is canonizing Vatican II itself. Additionally, the feast day chosen for John XXIII was October 11, the anniversary of the 1962 opening of Vatican II, which had no other saint’s feast day.

What does “signs of the times” mean? It was first used by John XXIII in *Humanae Salutis* ([*in English*](#), [*in Latin*](#)), the document announcing his call to the council, and then again in *Pacem in Terris*, a document written in the era of the Cold War and the Cuban missile crisis but still timely today as we face war in Ukraine. A Vatican II subcommittee sought to define the term “signs of the times.”

Fr. Jim said, “One perceives God’s action directing humanity toward the fulfillment of God’s designs. In these movements – and I think we can’t do mission in the abstract, we are always link it to reading the signs of the times and after 52 years in the Philippines, I came back earlier this year and I’m shocked, in a certain sense, at the realities of American culture. We have to be able to read those signs if we are going to be able to do mission effectively.”

To understand the signs of the times, we need to operate on two levels: a socio-historical level that examines the great changes of society and explores the impacts of those changes on the human condition (hearts, minds, social interactions). Beyond facts about poverty, the daily or yearly earnings, but the human impact, the reality of migration today caused by poverty and what that does to family life. Reading the signs means knowing the data and asking about the human impact in daily lives of people.

The second task is on a pastoral-theological-missiological level: How do we evaluate these facts in the light of our faith? Interpreting these facts in the light of the Gospel then guides us precisely where we should be going in missionary work. “I think this is one of the top ten quotes of Vatican II,” Fr. Jim said, quoting *Gaudium et Spes*: “the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel (4).”

What is the Church’s task? What is its mission? To serve contemporary society and humanity. The approach of the missionary disciple is to discern what is the fruit of the kingdom and what isn’t.

In *EG*, Francis quotes from bishops around the world, encouraging local bishops to discern the appropriate response in their territory instead of relying on the Pope to take their place. Based on his deep personal reflection, *EG* has been said to be a summary of his 70+ years of life as a Christian, his engagement in mission, his engagement directing seminarians. There are no magic shortcuts. We

have to go through the challenging process of looking at the world and discerning where to go in living out the Joy of the Gospel.

When Pope Francis visited the Philippines in 2015, Fr. Jim served as CNN commentator. The pope's theme was "Mercy and Compassion," because of the hurricane that had struck a year earlier. "Yes, I'm late, but I'm here." Pope Francis has a great sense of humor and he's also very down to earth. He says, Christians must not look like they just came back from a funeral... or like a sour-puss (yes, that's a direct translation). Recently, he observed to Mexican pilgrims that good Mexican tequila might help with his bad knee.

In our missionary work, we have to enjoy good humor. The foundress of the Maryknoll sisters wanted her sisters to have a good sense of humor. Things happen with languages. For instance, *Carida Amazonia* sounds fine in Spanish and Portuguese, but in the Phillipines it has a very different meaning in the Phillipine languages: 'your mistress.'

After reviewing a brief list of daunting signs and challenges, Fr. Jim observed that these evils. "Francis is not overwhelmed by current realities. He asserts: "The evils of our world—and those of the Church—must not be excuses for diminishing our commitment and our fervor. Let us look upon them as challenges which can help us to grow" (84). "Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment" (109).

Mission, evangelization must be capable of shedding light on new ways of relating to God. Uniformity and rigidity is not suited to today's complex reality. Look at what is happening, and as you engage in your work (education, medical services, diocesan support). You're not going to solve everything but respond with deep faith, Fr. Jim said.

The 8 "no" statements- these factors diminish us:

"No to an economy of exclusion" (53-54); "No to the new idolatry of money" (55-56); "No to a financial system which rules rather than serves" (57-58); "No to the inequality which spawns violence" (59-60); "No to selfishness and spiritual sloth" (81-83); "No to sterile pessimism" (84-86); "No to spiritual worldliness" (93-97); and, "No to warring among ourselves" (98-101).

This book captures so much of what we all are about in mission.

The 7 "yes" statements:

"Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm!" (80); "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization!" (83); "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope!" (86); "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community!" (92); "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the Gospel!" (97); "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love!" (101); and, "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigor!" (109).

Look closely at the signs of the times for a more mature and effective missionary response. Pope Francis uses a form of "joy" nearly 100 times in *EG*, mining from both *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Gaudete en Domino (On Christian Joy)*. Both he and Pope Paul VI emphasize that the Gospel must be heard from joyful evangelizers, or it is dead and will not be heard and received in today's society.

Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once wrote: “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.” Joy is convincing; joy evangelizes. You must have joy. If not, you cannot laugh at all the stupid things you will say as you learn a new language. Enjoy our human foibles and mistakes, that’s what people will remember. One missionary once accidentally said on Easter Sunday, “on the third day Jesus had a great ‘breakfast’ instead of ‘resurrection’ – the people never forgot that homily!”

With heartfelt emotion, Pope Francis writes: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ.... I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day” (3). “I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy” (1).

Missionary disciples must listen frequently to the admonition of Saint Paul: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. ‘The Lord is near’ (Phil 4:4). In our conference here at USCMA, we rejoice. Be a joyful missionary disciple.

Presented at USCMA Convention 2022